



# Believing in the Black Messiah: The Legio Maria Church in an African Christian Landscape

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# Believing in the Black Messiah

## The Legio Maria Church in an African Christian Landscape

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Matthew Kustenbauder

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the Legio Maria Church of western Kenya, a relatively rare example of schism from the Roman Catholic Church in Africa. One of more than seven thousand African Initiated Churches in existence today, it combines conservative Catholicism, traditional religion and charismatic manifestations of the Spirit. Yet this group is different in one important respect—it worships a black messiah, claiming that its founder, Simeo Ondeto, was Jesus Christ reincarnated in African skin. This article considers factors involved in the group's genesis as a distinct modern-day messianic movement, including: (1) the need to defend and define itself vis-à-vis Roman Catholicism; (2) the appropriation of apocalyptic ideas found in Christian scriptures and their synthesis with local religious traditions; and (3) the imitation of Jesus' example and teaching to confront political and religious persecution in a manner marked by openness, universalism and non-violence. Eschewing Western theological categories for African ones, this article draws upon internal sources and explanations of Legio Maria's notion of messianism and Ondeto's role therein to illustrate that, far from being a heretical sect, Legio may well represent a more fully contextualized and authentically homegrown version of Catholicism among countless other African Christian realities.

The Legio Maria of African Church Mission, popularly known as Legio Maria (Legion of Mary), is one of more than seven thousand African Initiated Churches (AICs) in existence today<sup>1</sup> and the largest secessionist group from the Roman Catholic Church in modern

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African history. Membership estimates range from 20,000 in 1964 to two million in the 1990s. While actual figures are difficult to ascertain, Legios today probably number more than one million.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, Simeo Ondeto and his religious movement are little known outside narrow academic circles. While the movement has been noted by social and religious historians of Africa since its inception in the 1960s as the paramount example of schism from Roman Catholicism, the scant scholarship on Legio Maria does more to demonstrate the prejudices of Western theological and secular thinking than to understand the movement on its own terms. This article argues that Legio Maria's particular ways of worshipping, believing and remembering the past make it a truly African church, and that these particularities may best be explained in relation to the larger social context in which the movement emerged. Based on interviews with Legio leaders and followers, attendance at Legio worship gatherings and a critical rereading of the secondary literature, this article presents an analysis of Legio Maria by illustrating the fusion of traditional, biblical and prophetic elements into a unique form of Christianity that takes its place as one of countless Christian realities in a burgeoning African Christian landscape.

### **AN OVERVIEW OF LEGIO MARIA**

Legio Maria was founded by Roman Catholic Luos in western Kenya between 1962 and 1963, years marking Kenya's transition from colonial rule to independence. The founders were lay people, Gaudencia Aoko (b. 1943) and Simeo Ondeto (c. 1910/20–1991). Ondeto established his headquarters on the mountain of Got Kwer, which he and his followers referred to as the New Jerusalem and the Holy City. Aoko, meanwhile, drew thousands into the movement through her charismatic preaching, and she conducted mass baptisms according to the instruction of Ondeto and his mother. Within a year, the fledgling church claimed nearly 100,000 members and hailed Ondeto as Baba Messias (Father Messiah) and "the living God."<sup>3</sup>

Considerable confusion exists in the written and oral sources of the movement regarding the precise role of Gaudencia Aoko and the nature of her relationship to Ondeto. This likely points to ideological differences and power struggles within Legio's early leadership. By 1965 reports claim that Aoko had left Legio Maria to found her own church after Ondeto placed restrictions on women's roles and challenged her authority as a charismatic leader of the movement. She was later accepted back by Ondeto, but she no longer exercised a leadership role. While several early sources in the literature on Legio Maria speak of her as a founder and leader, Legios today no longer consider Aoko as such.<sup>4</sup> More careful historical research is needed to get a detailed picture of the group's fledgling stages, and the nature and extent of Aoko's



**Photo 1.** A home altar displays religious objects important to Legio spirituality, including photographs of Mama Maria and Baba Messias, a depiction of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, and a wooden sword representing the Archangel Michael, who gives Legios strength in their spiritual battles. Rosaries are not normally displayed on the home altar, but worn around the neck or hung on the wall until needed. Not pictured is a large wooden cross that stands behind the altar. The altar and sacred objects belong to Aneriko Omoto Okando of Butobe village, Butere/Mumias District, Western Province, Kenya. Photo courtesy of Matthew Kustenbauder.

involvement will likely remain a point of contention. What is known for certain is that Ondeto and Aoko both played influential roles in fomenting a movement that had stirred up substantial trouble for Roman Catholic missionaries and local officials in western Kenya by 1963.

Aside from Legio's homegrown messiah, another figure central to Legio piety is Mama Maria, the African incarnation of Bikira Maria (the Virgin Mary) and "spiritual mother" of Ondeto. Although some accounts erroneously link her to Aoko, Legio followers squarely reject this view. In this case, however, the denial of linkages to Aoko has less to do with lingering memories of a bitter power struggle or Legio's patriarchal tendencies than with a concern to preserve the oral history about Mama Maria's supernal origins and the cult of veneration that has grown up around her among Legio women.<sup>5</sup> The most common version of the story in circulation among Legios is that Mama Maria descended to earth on a rainbow, coming to live somewhere on the shores of Lake

Nyanza.<sup>6</sup> After receiving a vision, Ondeto sent his followers to locate the old Luo woman. Ondeto became her “spiritual son,” and images of Mama Maria and Baba Messias Ondeto adorn the altars of Legio Maria churches and the necks of Legio followers. In 1966, at age 90, Mama Maria died and is believed to have returned to heaven.<sup>7</sup> She participated in the movement for only three short years, yet her impact on Legio practice and belief is unmistakable. Just as Ondeto is associated with Christ, Mama Maria has become the recipient of Marian devotion, a central part of Legio piety expressed through songs, prayers, liturgies and organizational structure. The church building under which she is buried, at Efeso (Ephesus) near Nzoia village in South Ugenya, Siaya District, is one of three Legio holy sites. Each year at Christmas, thousands of pilgrims flock to this remote village to worship at her burial site.

Legio Maria has retained much of the Roman Catholic Church’s beliefs and worship practices, including liturgies, use of Latin in the Mass, an order of nuns and a hierarchy including bishops, cardinals and a pope.<sup>8</sup> However, scholars attributing these similarities to facile mimicry fail to recognize the ways in which they also indicate African agency through the adaptive use of Christian forms and ideas. The material elements of Roman Catholic Christianity—so easily recognized by Western observers in the flowing robes, substantial rosaries and Latin Mass of Legio Maria’s followers—remain intact only insofar as they have helped Legios reframe Christian faith within their own cultural complex, and as such they no longer carry quite the same meaning for Legios as for Western Catholics. Neither is it predictable which elements have been retained and which have not. For all its similarities with Roman Catholicism, Legio Maria shares many characteristics with African spiritual churches: healing rituals, exorcism, deliverance from witchcraft, prophecies, glossolalia, dream interpretation, visions, spirit possession, polygyny, and the prohibition of pork, tobacco, alcohol and dancing. A dynamic movement, it has also generated ideas and practices that are distinctive. One particularly noteworthy innovation is its doctrine of the three visitations of God—first to India in the person of Melchizedek, then to Palestine in the person of Jesus Christ and finally to Africa in the person of Simeo Ondeto.

In its first decades, Legio Maria was dismissed by mainstream religionists as a superstitious sect of Nilotic-speaking Luos, who are somewhat unpopular among their Bantu-speaking neighbors. Scholars predicted that its atavistic tendencies made it hopelessly root-bound and it would soon wither away.<sup>9</sup> Quite the contrary, the movement has spread its roots wide, becoming increasingly multi-ethnic and fanning out into other parts of Kenya as well as Uganda and Tanzania. Legio Maria churches are now located in all of East Africa’s major urban centers, including Kampala, Uganda, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya. Most often the faith has been transmitted by

rural migrant workers going to cities in search of work, but several high profile emissaries have done their part to popularize Legio Maria. Stephen Ondiek Oluoch, a Legio archbishop in Kenya, has been a Member of Parliament for the Ugenya constituency from 1983 to the present.<sup>10</sup> Also, the late Oginga Odinga, former vice president of Kenya and a powerful political opposition leader, had close ties with Legio Maria.<sup>11</sup> His son, Raila Odinga, the current prime minister, also has connections with the church.

### **SIMEO ONDETO: AN AFRICAN MESSIAH**

Little is known about Simeo Ondeto prior to the emergence of the Legio movement. According to several different accounts, he was born sometime between 1910 and 1926 in what was then the Nyabondo mission area in Kano, Kisumu District, Kenya.<sup>12</sup> Those who remember him before the movement's emergence report that Ondeto was not a prominent man. He was unmarried with no fixed *dala* (homestead), the mark of manhood according to the standards of Luo culture. He worked as a *kibarua* (casual laborer), doing odd jobs for people wherever he could find them. One of his employers, a woman named Lucia, remembered that "Simeo was humble, quiet and most obedient . . . a reliable and polite servant. He used most of his free hours in prayer. . . . I never thought that Simeo would start his own religion or become a leader of any kind, whether in the church or anywhere."<sup>13</sup>

Ondeto's social marginality seems to have been replicated in his religious life. Illiterate, he struggled to memorize his catechism, a prerequisite for baptism. When he was baptized finally as an adult on 12 October 1952 in the white farm area of Matetei Valley, he had already failed the catechetical exam four times and still could not say his prayers. Despite such poor performance, Ondeto was appointed an auxiliary catechist in the local mission and given a salary of forty shillings.<sup>14</sup> Relations between Ondeto and the Roman Catholic missionaries soured, however, when he used an entire month's pay to purchase for himself a large crucifix and religious habit. Such religious enthusiasm put him in opposition to the hierarchs, who felt that he was usurping priestly authority through the appropriation of symbols of religious leadership. Shortly thereafter, he received a vision from God commissioning him to heal, exorcise and lead people to a more authentic practice of their faith. Church authorities moved quickly to rein in his activities, but their response only seemed to legitimate Ondeto's claim to spiritual authority in the minds of common people, winning him even more adherents.

At first, Ondeto was regarded by his followers not so much as a messianic figure, but as a prophet sent by God to heal their sicknesses and give them knowledge and power withheld by the church hierarchy.<sup>15</sup> He was called *hono*, the man who could do miracles, and followers believed he

could prophesy, cure the sick, raise the dead, make the blind see and cast out evil spirits. Stories circulated about his superhuman deeds. He was said to know what was happening in other places and what was in people's hearts, and he could bestow these powers upon his disciples.<sup>16</sup> His followers at first referred to him as "the bishop." One early Legio devotee said:

The bishop has many kinds of powers. [He can stretch]...his arms out wide and everyone drops down and starts speaking in tongues. I really wonder where the bishop got this power from. I think he got it from God, for he has no parents, no brothers—everybody is his brother and his sister. And he can tell things you don't know and he knows what is in your heart.... The bishop can also cure all kinds of diseases.... You come, he lays his hands on you, he starts to pray, and you can hear the *juogi* [spirits] speaking "We're leaving, goodbye."<sup>17</sup>

Recorded in 1965, this interview mentions none of Ondeto's divine titles that would become so common in later accounts. Apparently, Ondeto's claim to divinity was not immediate, and it took some time before he was widely regarded as *Messias*, *Mwana wa Mungu*, the title for Jesus Christ found in the Swahili translation of the Bible and meaning "Messiah, Son of God." Yet it is also possible to detect in this early interview the seeds of ambiguity and changing beliefs about Ondeto's identity. On one hand, he was called bishop, a human designation. On the other, he had no parents or siblings, suggesting a supernatural origin.

The process by which Ondeto came to be regarded as an African messiah was marked by the fusion of Luo traditions about prophets with biblical patterns of messianism. Among nearly all Nilotic people, the *jabilo* (prophet) was one of the most important leaders. The position was acquired through contact with divinity and marked by extraordinary personal qualities exercised through the spiritual and political functions of judge, magician and prophet. While the lineage elder was respected, it was the *jabilo* who could return society to its proper orbit through the exercise of spiritual power. The source of this power came partly from God but also from individual spirits—refractions of divinity—who possessed the *jabilo*.<sup>18</sup> One tale about a *jabilo* who founded a new sub-tribe says that he took a long journey into feared Masai country where he endured hardships and collected magic and wisdom. Another celebrated *jabilo* was carried around Lake Victoria on the back of the great snake Mumbo, who made him immune to witchcraft, taught him to cure every disease and gave him the power to see into the future. Similar tales told by Legios—of how Ondeto arrived on Earth near the biblical Mount Ararat, journeyed through Ethiopia, Egypt and Israel, and wandered among the other tribes in Kenya—invoke familiar images of the traditional *jabilo*'s long journey to acquire wisdom and prove himself. These local images were then superimposed on an African Christian landscape.



In the early days of the movement, Ondeto was recognized as a holy man, more powerful than the *jolango* (diviner) or the Catholic priests. Visionary experiences including angelic visitors on rainbows, and heavenly visitations and books bestowed by God featured prominently as means of direct communication between God and Ondeto. Whereas traditional prophets communicated with ancestral spirits who mediated between human and divine, Ondeto entered the spiritual world through dreams and visions in which the messages he received were carried by biblical characters. God spoke to him through Abraham or the archangel Michael giving the rules of the *dini* (religion), punishment for false priests and the appointment of true priests. As the most hopeful components of Legio's message began to coalesce around Ondeto, who promised to free his followers from all kinds of oppression, he patterned his life more intentionally on the life of the biblical messiah. For example, he began referring to his mother as the mother of Jesus Christ. He apparently also remained celibate throughout his lifetime, saying, "all people are my children." In a culture that prizes marriage as essential to social advancement, Ondeto's self-denial placed him outside the boundaries of normal human relations and signaled that his was a higher purpose. Indeed, as one follower explained, "God has forbidden him to marry. He is going to be the father of the world."<sup>19</sup>

Rejection by religious and secular authorities also played an important role in confirming Ondeto's divinity. When he was arrested in 1964 for holding illegal meetings, his followers saw his trial and imprisonment as a parallel of Jesus' persecution.<sup>20</sup> Legio followers point out that just as Melchizedek was not accepted among the Asians (in India), and just as Jesus was not accepted among the Europeans (in Palestine), so, too, their African messiah was ridiculed, imprisoned and rejected by the masses.<sup>21</sup> Persecution—especially in the form of a highly publicized arrest, trial and acquittal—added fuel to the movement. For Ondeto's followers, it demonstrated the truth of his claims and strengthened their belief in him as a Christ-figure. They saw themselves as martyrs for the faith, enduring the barbs of a faithless world.

Drawing upon the history of the first-century Jesus movement preserved in the Bible and Christian tradition, Legio Maria has constructed and maintained its own repository of legitimating stories about its messiah. Many of them feature elements of expiatory suffering and signs of divine approval authenticating Ondeto as the true savior for African people. They typically combine elements of Catholic piety, biblical narratives and local landmarks. One example concerns the meeting of Baba Messias and Mama Maria at Mount Kalafari on Got Kwer, a steep hill, which juts out of dry scrubland bordering the shores of Lake Nyanza.<sup>22</sup> According to Father Silvanus Onege, Legio priest and custodian of the oral tradition:



One day he [Ondeto] told his followers that today we are going to the top of that hill.... When they started to climb the hill the Baba Messias had nothing in his hands. After reaching the middle of this hill everybody saw this man carrying a very big cross. They didn't know where this cross had come from. He was walking and reached a point where he fell down. At that point where he fell down was laid a marker to remind us of what happened. After that they went ahead with their journey. He fell down again. Again at that point was laid another cross. They went ahead again. He fell down again. The same thing happened. After reaching the peak of that hill, they saw that his hands were empty; there was no cross with him. Here is where he came to greet his mother. His mother hugged him and told him, "Oh my son I've searched [for] you all over the world and today I've found you." [...] At that time...they heard a voice coming from the sunrise, singing the song of "Ave Maria." [He sings.] [...] After listening they heard another voice coming...from heaven, that a long time ago God promised to bring for us a savior, so that he can open for us the gates of heaven which Adam and Eve closed for us. [...] And that is how Legio Maria started on that hill. They called every people from different parts of the country, and those possessed by demons came and the demons were cast away.<sup>23</sup>

The storyline takes its shape from three familiar events found in the gospels: Jesus' passion at Calvary, the theophany at his baptism in the Jordan, and the annunciation of Mary.<sup>24</sup> The biblical accounts are then infused with elements of Roman Catholic devotion and reenacted on local geography, the Legio holy mountain.<sup>25</sup> Such stories confirm for Legios the truth of their belief in Ondeto as Messias, but they also link Jesus' life and suffering to Ondeto, who together with Mama Maria serves as an African manifestation of the divine.

Forming an authentic African Christian faith with an African messiah entailed more than simple construction and translation. It involved a deconstructive process as well—the careful erasure of history. Legio leaders were confronted with the problem of their founder's past. If God was Ondeto's father, and Ondeto was the messiah, some explanation of his earthly family was in order. As Audrey Wipper noted, "It is difficult to regard Owiti's son, whom you have known for years and with whom you have tended cattle, as the new messiah."<sup>26</sup> In the social context of rural western Kenya, where family relationships link the individual to a clan, location and sub-location, it was necessary to disguise or otherwise obfuscate those connections to claim a divine heritage. Accordingly, Ondeto and his followers shrouded his past in mystery through the promulgation of origin myths and collective forgetting. Today, some say that he was born to an ordinary father and mother, but that he was really the messiah. More common, though, is the claim that Simeo had no father or mother but was found by an old man called Ombimbo (in truth, his biological father), who raised him as his own son.<sup>27</sup> This version of Ondeto's origin dates back to the mid-1960s, when it was recounted by a Legio follower:

He (Simeo) was picked up [when he was a boy] by a certain old man who was known as Ombimbo of Kano location, sub location Awasi, of the Migere clan. The old man looked after him for a number of years and the boy herded cattle. Then the boy disappeared. Nobody knew where he went but I hear some people say that he went to a mountain in South Nyanza.<sup>28</sup>

Another believer echoed the story, explaining: “Simeo has no father and no mother. I just heard of an old man who picked him up at Muhoroni. This man found him when he was a boy but nobody knows where he came from.”<sup>29</sup> Among his followers, Ondeto is regarded like the pre-existent “Son of Man” in biblical lore, who at the appointed hour stepped out of heaven and appeared on earth.<sup>30</sup>

An account from the *Daily Nation* demonstrates how, by the time of Ondeto’s death, non-Legios’ attempts to root Baba Messiah Ondeto in the particularities of a Luo genealogy were vociferously rejected by church members. When one of Ombimbo’s sons tried to give a detailed family history at Ondeto’s funeral by placing the Baba Messiah as the third-born in a family of four brothers and one sister, he was shouted down by Legios who objected, “*Huyu hajui . . . Messiah hakuzaliwa. Yeye ni Mungu!*” which may be translated, “This man doesn’t know . . . the Messiah wasn’t born. He is God!”<sup>31</sup>

If questions about Ondeto’s birth proved answerable through the use of narrative history, so, too, were questions about his death. Indeed, Ondeto’s passing posed little trouble for the members of Legio Maria, who did not expect their messiah to live forever. Nor did Ondeto foster such an expectation, as is clear from the fact that he designated a successor to the movement in 1966. For faithful Legios, Ondeto’s fulfillment of salvation history did not require his continual presence; their Baba Messiah would return to heaven, just like Jesus Christ had done before him and Melchizedek had done before him. Thus, when Ondeto died on a visit to a Legio church near Kisumu in 1991, the only controversy was where to bury the body. Initially, there were attempts to bury him at the Legio headquarters and pilgrimage site he had established at St. Mary’s Basilica, Jerusalem-Amoyo.<sup>32</sup> In the end, however, Legio leaders decided on a site that carried powerful associations with biblical and traditional spirituality. Ondeto was laid to rest at Kalafari (Calvary) atop Got Kwer, where Luo diviners had once consulted ancestral spirits and where Ondeto had been acclaimed as savior. It was also in the scaling of this mountain—stumbling with a heavy cross as he climbed—that Ondeto’s actions were symbolic of Christ’s walk to crucifixion, a kind of proleptic demonstration of his own death. Following Ondeto’s death, and according to previous arrangements by Messiah and Bikira Maria (who had selected Timotheo as her “second spiritual son” before her death in 1966), Timotheo Blasio Atila (1941–1998) became pope of the Legio Maria Church.<sup>33</sup>

These examples provide some insights into the role of biblical and extra-biblical revelation in the development of Legio Maria as an African Christian movement. While the universality of Ondeto's spiritual mandate may have been patterned on the biblical figure of Jesus Christ, he invoked methods of leadership and symbols of authority that were deeply informed by notions of the *jabilo* in Luo society. Common cultural resonances in the Bible and African society made the connections even easier. No doubt, when Luo people read or heard accounts of Jesus' miracles they would have reinterpreted Jesus as a divinely inspired *jabilo*. Much of Legio Maria's success is due to the way in which Simeo Ondeto combined the qualities of the traditional Luo prophet and the life of Jesus Christ, thus synthesizing old and new, local and global concepts in the creation of a black messiah.

### **LEGIO MARIA'S (RE)FORMATION: AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

Thus far, treatment of Legio Maria has focused mainly on the person of Simeo Ondeto and how traditional and biblical elements were fused to create an African messiah. It is important, however, to broaden the scope of analysis to consider Legio Maria as a new religious movement and the wider sociohistorical context that influenced its formation. Toward this end, the remaining discussion locates Legio within dominant religious and political currents to demonstrate how its adherents navigated a complex social terrain that shaped their new faith.

#### **Cries for Reform**

The rift between Legio Maria and Roman Catholicism reflects the religious malaise that prevailed in much of western Kenya at that time. In the 1930s, a charismatic and evangelical church revival movement in Rwanda called *Balokole* (Ganda for "those who are saved") spread throughout much of East Africa, including Kenya. Christians left the mission churches in droves to found new African Independent Churches. By the mid-1960s literally dozens of independent church groups had emerged, challenging the mainline churches on their own turf.<sup>34</sup> Many Africans who stayed in European-dominated churches started renewal movements aimed at transforming the churches from within. One such figure was Matthew Ajuoga, an ordained Anglican priest and leader of the renewal group popularly known as *Johera* (Luo for "people of love"). For several years Ajuoga resisted separatist tendencies and worked hard to keep Johera within the Anglican Communion. But when church authorities suppressed Johera's activities in 1957 by suspending clergy and calling in colonial police for enforcement, Ajuoga walked out and took seven clergy and 16,000 members

with him.<sup>35</sup> Johera's break from the Anglican Communion is just one of countless schisms in the 1950s and 1960s that erupted in Christian denominations as a nexus of African Christian activity, with the result that there are now more than 500 registered churches in Kenya.

Nevertheless, in comparison to Protestant Christianity, which tends to be fissiparous, Catholicism has strongly resisted schism. Indeed, Legio Maria was the only breakaway Roman Catholic group to emerge in western Kenya—virtually all the others splintered from Protestant churches. It remains one of only a handful on the continent, making it a notable exception worthy of closer study. Several factors contributed to the tensions and eventual break between Legio members and the Roman Catholic Church. In the first place, Catholic missionary activities engendered a certain amount of ambivalence among the people of western Kenya, particularly the Luo. On one hand, when the Mill Hill Fathers arrived in 1894, the Luo showed themselves eager to embrace the faith.<sup>36</sup> Their *jabilo* (diviners), who wielded considerable influence, had apparently foretold the coming of marvelous strangers and warned that hostility toward them would incur the wrath of the ancestors.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the missions enjoyed almost immediate local cooperation and growth during the first half of the twentieth century. After the Second World War, Catholic missions in western Kenya expanded even more rapidly. In Luo areas alone, the number increased from twelve in 1948 to twenty-two by 1963.<sup>38</sup> However, the Roman Catholic Church's success in winning converts and constructing a network of mission stations, schools and clinics concealed an undercurrent of discontent. One problem was that people often felt ostracized within their own churches. For instance, in the Kisumu Diocese over half of the nearly 500,000 people calling themselves Catholic were excluded from full participation in religious life. Missionary efforts to end polygamy and their refusal to recognize traditional nuptials as valid resulted in thousands being denied access to the sacraments due to "irregular marriages."<sup>39</sup> In addition, some of the flock felt neglected due to a lack of shepherds: with an average of one priest for every 5,000 Catholics, adequate pastoral care became impossible.<sup>40</sup> Finally, other Africans accused the priests of being greedy, pointing out that they only dispensed spiritual healing power in return for payment.<sup>41</sup>

These problems were met with cries for reform, and several lay movements emerged to take up the task. The most significant for this study is the well-established movement called the Legion of Mary, brought to Kenya in the 1930s by Edel Mary Quinn, a missionary from Ireland. Appealing to people's traditional piety and built on a hierarchical order, the Legion of Mary aimed to sanctify its members through prayer and works of charity. Many Africans responded enthusiastically to the Legion as an avenue for greater lay involvement in mission work and more active participation in the church. By 1949, five years after Quinn's

death, there were three *curiae* and sixty-five *praesidia* in the Diocese of Kisumu.<sup>42</sup> The 1950s saw a worldwide wave of Marian devotion, invigorated by the 1950 declaration of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven as dogma and the centenary commemoration of the dogmatic declaration of the Immaculate Conception in 1954. Processions of the Blessed Virgin were common, stories of her miraculous appearances to the children of Fatima and healings at Lourdes were recounted, and devotional crusades in places like Kisumu drew over 35,000 attendees. Before long, Luo Catholics began reporting stories of their own encounters with Mary, most of which involved miraculous healings.

While such religious fervor won converts, it also stirred up renewed calls for reform, and the Legion of Mary became a platform from which charismatic laypersons launched their attacks on the establishment. One such figure was Maria Ragat, who in 1952 claimed to have a vision in which the Virgin Mary gave her healing powers and told her to tell the people how they could be good Catholics and have direct access to God without the mediation of “money-hungry priests.” Ragat gained such a following in Nyanza that by 1954 the local parish church was nearly empty. Losing the battle for souls, Roman Catholic hierarchs enlisted the help of colonial authorities; the movement was proscribed and Maria Ragat was hauled off to Nairobi as punishment for her subversive activities. The expansion of the Legion of Mary in western Kenya and the desires for renewal it inspired among the laity form the immediate backdrop to Legio Maria’s development as an independent, African Christian church.<sup>43</sup>

But other factors originated outside the Roman Catholic Church. One was the highly fragmented religious climate emerging from so many competing missions. By the 1950s western Kenya was home to Catholics, Anglicans, Quakers, Seventh-day Adventists and Southern Baptists as well as the Salvation Army, Africa Inland Mission, Church of God and Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. Mission stations were sometimes established for no other reason than to prevent others from gaining a stronghold in an area.<sup>44</sup> Africans actively participated in these denominational turf wars, keen to join the *dini* (religion) that would give them the best competitive edge. Another factor was the coming of *uhuru* (independence). On a national scale Kenyans were asserting self-reliance and putting an end to white dominance. Independence was in the air, and tremors in the political order had antecedents in the religious sphere, where Africans sought greater autonomy within the missions or formed their own churches.

Despite these factors Legio Maria may have remained a movement of religious reform and renewal, but the Roman Catholic Church’s response ensured otherwise. Condemnation by local priests and the national hierarchy effectively foreclosed any possibility that the group might operate within the framework of the Catholic Church and helped

crystallize Legio Maria as a separate entity. In a 1964 interview Ondeto explained that he had had no intention of breaking with Roman Catholicism but local Catholic leaders had forced his group to leave.

When we went to a Catholic church [to pray] the priest called in the police and the police tried to stop us . . . so we asked the police what we should do and the police said we could have our own church. So, this year we started building our own small churches.<sup>45</sup>

Newspaper reports and court records confirm that the Catholic hierarchs did their best to suppress and distance themselves from Legio's activities. In April 1964 the Roman Catholic Legion of Mary protested at the illegitimate use of its name. In September, after Ondeto and his followers were released from prison, Vice General Monsignor Thomas McEnnis of the Archdiocese of Nairobi formally dissociated the Roman Catholic Church in that country from Legio Maria, warning Catholics not to have any dealings with the sect.<sup>46</sup>

Several arrests were likely prompted by pressure from Catholic priests who felt threatened by Legio Maria. On 11 April 1964 police received a report that Legio Maria followers were planning to attack Segia Catholic Mission. Just seven days later, twenty-four members, including Ondeto, were arrested for holding an illegal meeting. Then on 26 April another thirty-nine members were arrested at an illegal meeting in Nzoia village, Central Nyanza. The following day newspapers reported that Legio Maria adherents believed their leader was "Jesus, Son of God" and that the end of the world was near. Members were said to have stopped working because they believed God would provide them with food. Other newspapers reported that children stopped going to school, women deserted their husbands and Legio maintained it was the only religion for Africans.<sup>47</sup>

For Catholic officials, Ondeto stepped outside ecclesiastical boundaries when he and his followers began baptizing converts. But for Legio Maria members, responsibility for the schism rests on the shoulders of the Roman Catholic establishment and its suppression of Ondeto's activities that forced him to go out on his own. As one Legio member pointed out: "*Sisi ni Katoliki kamili*. . . . We are true Catholics. Our leader never intended to leave the church, but they chased him away when he started exercising the powers given to him by God to free people from sickness and evil spirits."<sup>48</sup>

Measures taken by the Catholic hierarchy to discipline and discredit the group only drove Legio out of the Roman Catholic Church, made its followers more determined and galvanized their identity as a persecuted group. Efforts by local political authorities to contain renegades with force backfired as well. Police action leading to Ondeto's imprisonment and trial in Kisumu during the summer of 1964 brought the

movement into the limelight for the first time, giving Legio Maria national and international exposure. In June 1964 several Members of Parliament raised the issue of Legio Maria in the National Assembly. Daniel Arap Moi, a Member of Parliament for Baringo North and later Kenya's second president, cautioned that the sect's growth was worrying the government and the public. Oginga Odinga, Minister for Home Affairs and soon to be vice-president under Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, claimed the sect was harmless and non-political. On 18 July 1964 hundreds gathered outside Kisumu as Simeo and his followers were released.<sup>49</sup> As with religious efforts to suppress Legio, political attempts at suppression propelled the movement's most rapid period of expansion. Long-time Legio adherents remember it as a time of general excitement: Legio priests enthusiastically recruited members, there was talk of Legio's miraculous cures, and anxiety over Simeo Ondeto's fate fueled followers' messianic devotion.

### **Legitimacy in a New Church**

Early on, Legio Maria depicted itself over against Roman Catholicism as the legitimate religion for Africans. In the words of Legio Bishop Tobias Ayieta, "We are still Catholics although we don't have anything to do with the Roman Catholics in Rome. There is a big difference between Africa and Italy."<sup>50</sup> Legio followers were painfully aware that despite the achievement of political independence, African Christians were still expected to take their cues from foreign missionaries, accept Eurocentric biblical interpretations and conform to Western customs. Gaudencia Aoko expressed similar frustration with the irrelevance of missionary churches in a 17 July 1964 interview:

We believe we can pray to God even though we are Africans. We get the key to heaven from Jesus not from Rome. [. . .] Foreign missionaries just cannot understand the heart of the African people. All power for good we get from God. [. . .] [We] see no reason why foreign priests and others should attempt to interfere with what we are doing.<sup>51</sup>

The movement's most combative message focused on specific agents of evil: spirits, witches and foreign missionaries. Given anti-establishment sentiment at the time of Legio's founding, it is not surprising that Ondeto soon claimed that he was the legitimate African pope and Legio Maria the legitimate church for Africans. This positioned Legio and its leadership as a kind of foil to the Roman Catholic Church and its European-dominated hierarchy in Rome.

Another important result of the dialectical process characterizing Legio Maria's (re)formation of Catholicism was Legio's success in laying claim to sources of biblical and traditional authority that drew out connections between African culture and Christian scripture. Several



examples are illustrative. The book of Revelation is thought by members to contain specific references to Legio. For example, the apocalyptic black horse and its rider in Revelation 6 are thought to represent Legio and its Messiah. Six of the seven churches of Revelation 2–3 are identified with the mission churches. The church at Philadelphia is identified with Legio, and its message is received as a message for Legio.<sup>52</sup>

I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word. . . .  
I will make those of the synagogue of Satan...come and bow down before  
your feet. . . . I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the  
whole world. . . . I am coming soon. . . . I will write on you the name of  
my God, and . . . the new Jerusalem, that comes down from my God out  
of heaven (Rev. 3:8–12).

Legio members cite countless other biblical passages to legitimate their practices and beliefs along similar lines.<sup>53</sup> Before entering the vast church compound at Efeso, all are required to remove their shoes at the gate. Father Silvanus Onege explained that just as Moses took off his shoes before the burning bush (Exodus 3; Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37; Acts 7:30–35), so too must worshipers remove their shoes before entering God's presence.<sup>54</sup> Legios read the biblical narrative in a way that places them within its drama. As one Legio follower said, "Our Jesus has come back. We are following another Jesus just as Peter did."<sup>55</sup>

Legios also cite the power that accompanies their prayer services. Healing and exorcism play a prominent role in Legio Maria worship. Wipper's survey, conducted during her fieldwork in 1964 and 1965, shows that half of Legio's converts came to the church because it cured them of *juogi* (spirits).<sup>56</sup> When in 1985 Nancy Schwartz asked why people joined Legio, over 60 percent offered reasons related to healing of an illness of some kind—illness caused by witchcraft, a foul spirit, "Western" illnesses, barrenness or drinking problems.<sup>57</sup> While the frequency with which Jesus heals or casts out evil spirits in the gospels fails to resonate with many modern Western readers, for most Africans this speaks directly to their everyday lived experience.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary Legio services regularly feature exorcisms or prayers for healing, both of which rely on adjuration, laying on of hands, oil massages, rosaries, catenas and the aspersion or ingestion of *pu hawi* (holy water). Supporters deploy accounts of Legio's curative powers as a form of legitimizing discourse and as recruitment tools.<sup>59</sup>

Legio Maria has bolstered its authority through connections with traditional religious and cultural ideas. For instance, followers have linked Bikira Maria to old Luo tales about Nyamgondho and Simbi Nyaima, ancient women who punished the community for denying hospitality, but rewarded those who provided assistance with gifts of rain-making. The traditional form of storytelling, *gano*, has been incorporated into prayer services. Here Legio alternates portions of Roman Catholic



**Photo 2.** Legio Maria prophet-healers (man center, woman right) at Efeso move among the kneeling congregants dispensing *pu hawi* (holy water) from plastic bottles. The water is either squirted into the mouth or dispersed over the people using a fly-whisk. Photo courtesy of Matthew Kustenbauder.

prayers such as the “Hail Mary” with petitions referring to Luo traditional heroes and local geography. In addition, many material elements of Legio religious culture have direct linkages to traditional religious practices. Legio women ring bells in their homes to invite angels to enter and provide protection in much the same way as the *ajuoga* (traditional practitioner) would call *juogi* to help alleviate spirit-induced sicknesses. The fly whisk is used by Legio prophets to sprinkle holy water just as the *ajuoga* used it to asperse the sick with herbal medicines. Legio followers make their rosaries and catenas out of the same *otiro* and *ajua* seeds that were important for ornamentation, medication and divination. Finally, perhaps the most important connection was Legio Maria’s recognition of the spiritual etiology of illness. In the traditional religious worldview, sickness and disease frequently are caused by spiritual forces. Legio Maria has acknowledged that the physical world is not a self-contained system but intimately joined to the supernatural. Its prophets and priests assume the traditional role of the *ajuoga*, calling upon a host of spiritual forces—angels, the Holy Spirit, Baba Messias or Mama Maria—to heal and to exorcise evil spirits.<sup>60</sup>

Legio Maria has also positioned itself as a constructive force in Kenyan popular history. Through the telling of stories, their founder/messiah has

emerged as a protagonist in the liberation struggle. Some followers identify Ondeto with Mau Mau freedom-fighter and national hero Dedan Kimathi. The Mau Mau rebellion, carried out by members of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), was a prolonged armed struggle for independence from British rule fought primarily by the Kikuyu in the White Highlands region around Mount Kenya from 1952 to 1960. Kimathi died during the conflict and became a national hero. The identification of Ondeto with Kimathi makes sense on several levels. Kimathi, who also spoke using parables and biblical references, was said to have been able to turn himself into a bird, an airplane or the wind. Ondeto also was known as a “shape-shifter,” appearing sometimes as a child and other times as an old man, even appearing in different locations at once. More important, perhaps, is the fact that Ondeto’s linkage to “Field Marshal” Kimathi connects Legio Maria to a national liberation figure admired by all Kenyans.

Other Legios hold that their founder had entered inside the Mau Mau fighters as Spirit, becoming one with the fighters and giving them strength.<sup>61</sup> In Legio discourse, Ondeto’s arrival as Baba Messias and Legio Maria’s rupture with the Roman Catholic Church is no longer a threat to the social order but a way in which the struggle for independence in Kenya is won, helping Legio transcend its Luo ethnic boundaries. Linking Ondeto to national liberation fighters suggests that the Legio Maria Church is for all Kenyans and has the nation’s best interests at heart. But it is also a form of self-protection, an *apologia* in response to the scrutiny and harassment it endured under the new government. Above all, such stories demonstrate the manifold linkages Legios have used to remember and make history. They point to another kind of reformation, one of identity construction, in which Legios positioned themselves on a competitive religious scene to vie for adherents and legitimacy in a fledgling nation.

In its struggle against Roman Catholic and secular authorities to form an African Christian church, Legio Maria appealed to recognized sources of authority—local and foreign, oral and written, ancient and contemporary—to legitimate its beliefs and practices. Adherence to the Bible and retention of Catholic forms of worship gave a certain credibility to Legio’s claims vis-à-vis mainstream Christianity, and connections between African traditions and Legio figures captured the popular imagination and extended its reach beyond Luo ethnic boundaries. But these were not simply public relations tactics on the part of Legio leaders. As early studies suggest, the movement began organically and, until recently, there was little concern to harmonize or codify the fluid oral tradition of its origins, heroes and history. Indeed, Legio’s appropriation of the Bible, Roman Catholic symbols and practices, Kenyan national history, Luo folklore and traditional religious ideas is very much a hermeneutical move. It is an attempt to understand and

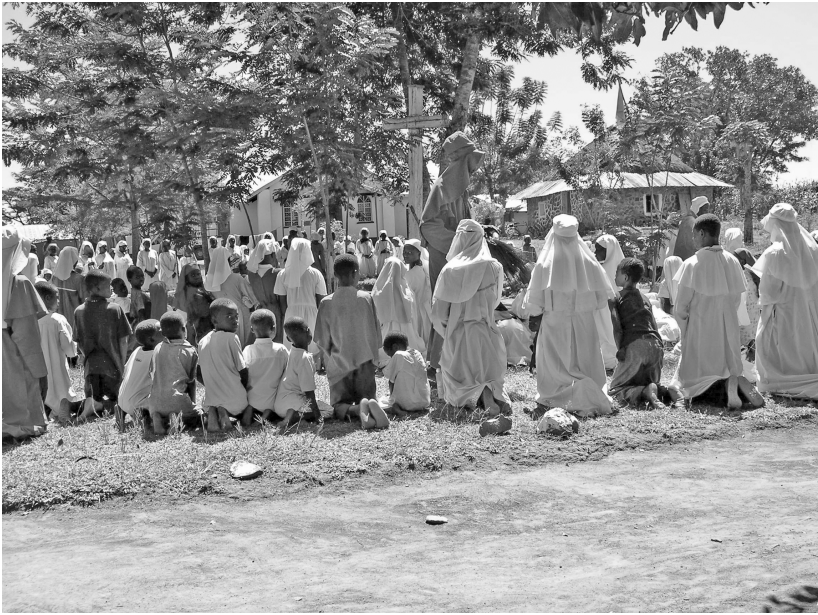
negotiate the world in which they live, connecting their present experience with local and global history as well as projecting themselves into the future.

### **Legio Worship**

In the contest for legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Africans, Legio Maria was able to score points against the Roman Catholic Church—which was slow to Africanize—by incorporating local symbols, practices and beliefs. Nowhere perhaps is the African reformation affected in the Legio Maria Church more evident than in their worship.

Nothing was made from scratch. Legios retained the signs, symbols, structures, rituals, prayers and texts of the Roman Catholic Church and converted them for their own use. As Father Ephraim Wesonga Chitayi explained: “The first Legios began . . . because the Catholic missionaries could not lead the people in the right way.”<sup>62</sup> Yet, in their prayers and confession of faith, Legios still affirm their belief in “the holy catholic church.”<sup>63</sup> Legio Masses closely follow the Catholic Mass. Priests use the old Latin missal, or copy the service from one if they do not possess it.<sup>64</sup> Bible readings during services are taken from the Catholic lectionary. Legio’s leadership structure—pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests and deacons—mirrors that of the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike in Catholicism, however, prophets play a prominent role in most Legio services; they are recognized for their gifts but are not assigned an office within the hierarchy. The priestly robes of the Catholic hierarchy have been democratized—Legios are easily identified by their distinctive, white robes, which nearly all followers wear for services. People of some position in the church don various brightly colored cassocks according to the orders of angels revealed to them in dreams and visions.

Legio structures tend to be cruder versions of their Catholic counterparts. At the front of the church is the altar, over which palm branches are hung. On it are placed the eucharistic elements, a Bible and a central crucifix, flanked by images of Jesus Christ and Baba Messias on the right, and Mama Maria and the Virgin Mary on the left. Women sit on the left, a side with symbolic devaluation in Luo culture. The faithful sing and chant services in Latin, light candles, burn incense in ample quantities, ring bells, and celebrate eucharist with wafers and Coca-Cola. They wear enormous rosaries called *catena* around their necks in addition to smaller *losali* or strings of prayer beads. Holy water features prominently; after it has been blessed, the priest dispenses it from a plastic squeeze bottle. In addition to grunts, groans and whistles, the worshipers cry “Mama” and “Baba” throughout the service, usually increasing in frequency and intensity until they celebrate the eucharist. After Mass, everyone processes from the church and encircles a large



**Photo 3.** Following Mass, Legio Maria worshippers kneel around a large wood cross at Efeso, while those with the gifts of healing and exorcism cast out evil spirits and cleanse them with holy water. A fly-whisk, a symbol of power traditionally wielded by African leaders and healers to bless and cleanse, is used as an aspergillum to sprinkle the people. Photo courtesy of Matthew Kustenbauder.

outdoor cross, where worshipers kneel and pray using their *losali* while the prophets move among them praying and aspersing them with holy water using their fly whisks.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, we see that Legio worship is patterned on Catholic forms and manipulated according to cultural sensibilities. The “we are still Catholics” sentiment, expressed earlier by Legio Bishop Tobias Ayieta, is echoed by Legios today. Legio does not rebaptize its Catholic followers and there is a good deal of movement between the two churches. At the same time, Legio emphatically rejects some Roman Catholic practices. Again, Father Chitayi explains: “Everything is Catholic in our services; the difference is that Legio is able to tell people the *truth*. Catholics say we are free to do anything, but we prohibit people from smoking, drinking and eating some foods not to be eaten by Christians.”<sup>66</sup> Legio priests proudly state that Legio does not charge for baptisms and funerals the way Catholics do, nor do they charge for their prayer services. Legios take the lack of supernatural manifestations in Roman Catholic services as proof that the Holy Spirit has departed. Their own healing services and exorcisms serve as proof of the Spirit’s power and validate peoples’ everyday concerns about evil spirits and witchcraft. In this



sense, Legio presents itself as a reformed and purified Catholic Church, offering a religious message relevant to ordinary African people and firmly rejecting practices accepted by Roman Catholics, such as drinking, smoking, dancing, funeral feasts and impure foods.

### **A Church For All: Legio's Inclusive Mission**

Since its formation, Legio Maria has appropriated and developed messianic ideas found in Christian scripture and local traditions. What may be most surprising is that despite the particularity of these sources, Legio espouses a concept of salvation that is quite universal. For example, the members I interviewed did not recriminate other Christian groups (except Catholics). In answer to questions about salvation, most held that anyone who loves and follows God will be saved. This radical inclusivity may be a corrective to the exclusion Legios felt under Catholicism, yet another way Legio's distinction as an African Christian church was shaped during its history as a reform movement within Roman Catholicism.

Legio Maria is unlike other churches that claim a small exclusive membership and prescribe strict rules and obligations. In the early days of the movement, Legio practiced on-the-spot conversion of any willing candidate, whether Catholic, Anglican, Muslim or pagan. It asked no questions, made no requirements and gave no promises. Converts simply knelt down and confessed their sins, and the sign of the cross was made on their forehead. The group's methods of conversion have changed little in forty years. Those who want to become Legios simply join, and members are free to buy a cassock (plain white robe worn by most Legios), cast out evil spirits and convert others.<sup>67</sup> During visits to Legio churches and meetings with leaders, I frequently was invited to participate long-term in Legio worship and community life. Once I was even asked to "take the message of Legio home" with me. This is not the picture of an inward-looking sect, quietly pursuing its way toward heaven.

Baba Messias' legacy has given Legio Maria's mission a universal thrust. He preached a message of peace, goodwill and the kinship of all humankind. Much of his time was spent traveling around the countryside, preaching, casting out unclean spirits and praying for anyone who asked. Ondeto frequently expressed the desire to found a church that would not simply be for Africans, but would be a universal church. "God sent me down and told me not to think in terms of Europeans, Asians, or even tribes. Everybody is part of the soil. . . . We want everyone, Catholics, Protestants, Whites, Africans to be one."<sup>68</sup> Followers remember their Baba's words well. Pointing to their official name, Legio Maria of African Church Mission, they explain that they may be of Africa but their ministry is to the whole world. The universalism of humanity is a central tenet of Christianity that has great appeal to Legio members and

leaders, who insist on a broad view of the elect. In the early days of the movement, one Legio bishop remarked, "It doesn't matter what *dini* (religion) you belong to . . . it's whether you follow the ten commandments."<sup>69</sup> More recently, one local priest emphasized that it is not just Legios who reach heaven, or just Africans or Christians, but "everyone who follows God."<sup>70</sup>

The Holy Spirit also plays an important function in distinguishing Legio Maria as an inclusive faith. In the biblical account of Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit became the mechanism by which faith in Jesus as the messiah was broadcast beyond the boundaries of a marginal Jewish sect "to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit occupies a similar role in Legio Maria. First, the Spirit is said to have given witness to Ondeto as the African messiah. Many people say that Ondeto never actually claimed to be the messiah but that his followers knew he was because the Spirit revealed it to them.<sup>71</sup> Second, miracles performed by the Holy Spirit validate Legio claims to the truth of their message. For instance, both Legio priests I interviewed said they were unschooled yet could read and speak in Latin. This, they explained, was a miracle of the Holy Spirit. They receive knowledge of Latin only during celebration of Mass for the glorification of God. But perhaps the most important aspect of the Spirit in universalizing Legio's message is its central role in healing and exorcism. In this sense, Legio offers the Spirit and the healing it brings to all people. The spiritual resources of Christianity are open to anyone. As one woman said, "When people were sick in the past, it was only the priest who could pray for someone. He was the only one with the *catena*. Now we can all pray."<sup>72</sup> In this regard, Schwartz correctly points out that it is under the Holy Spirit's inspiration that Legios have created their own unique church history and a sense of identity that is surprisingly open and incorporative.<sup>73</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In his groundbreaking 1968 study, David Barrett analyzed some six thousand new religious movements in Africa.<sup>74</sup> He concluded that independent churches were often formed in reaction to three factors neglected by Western-parented or mission churches: (1) philadelphia, a lack of genuine love on the part of mission churches and harshness in dealing with proselytes; (2) africanism, a failure to understand African traditions; and (3) biblicalism, a failure to discern links between African and biblical patterns of life. Reaction to all three factors may be observed in Legio Maria's (re)formation.

For scholars of Christianity, then, Legio Maria's belief in an African messiah raises important questions. Are Simeo Ondeto's claims to be "Son of God" and "Jesus Christ come back from heaven to earth" and his



followers' acclamation of him as "Baba Messias" much different from Jesus' claims and the songs, hymns and titular acclamations bestowed upon him by his followers? Comparativists will note that the relationship between Legio Maria and mission Christianity offers a striking parallel to ancient tensions between the ragtag followers of a self-proclaimed messiah and the pedigreed members of the religious establishment that ultimately resulted in Christianity's formal split from Judaism. The way Legio Maria defined itself vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic Church—first as a movement within Catholicism, then as a breakaway group and finally as the true Catholic Church—is similar to the way early Christians defended themselves against increasing persecution and alienation from the synagogues.

For those who hold the view that the incarnation of Jesus Christ in history is a once-and-for-all-event, Legio Maria is misguided and heretical.<sup>75</sup> Yet my own discussions with Legio followers reveal that, for them, Simeo Ondeto has not usurped the place of Jesus. Here it is important to understand in what context they declare Ondeto to be the messiah. When Legios explain the origins of their movement to an outsider, they assert that it began with a special act of God. Bikira Maria and her son (Ondeto) were sent by God to free African people from sin and oppression and to show them the right way to live. Implicit in the claim that divinity came into the world in Melchizedek, Jesus Christ and Simeo Ondeto is the belief that God intervenes in human affairs through these chosen figures, becoming one with humanity and altering the course of historical events. Legios refer to Ondeto as "God" not because of confused Trinitarian theology, but because he is seen as the embodiment of God in African history. They read biblical texts such as 1 John 4:2–3 in this light: "every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." "Therefore we say that Jesus has come in the flesh!"<sup>76</sup> With such texts, Legios make the point that God's identification with humankind is not limited to the classical incarnation event and God's plan of salvation is not geographically bound. Theirs is an insistent case for ongoing enculturation of the gospel based upon evidence of divine reincarnation.

In one sense, Legio Maria has not invented a new messiah but simply reenacted the Christ event in Africa. Thus, followers venerate an age-worn Luo woman as their Mama Maria and trust in a charismatic dreamer as their Baba Messias. Their oral traditions recount the carrying of the cross and a theophany on a hill in Nyanza Province they call Kalafari (Calvary). They tell of Ondeto's childhood miracles that mimic apocryphal accounts of Jesus as a young boy.<sup>77</sup> Their church headquarters are in Jerusalem-Amoyo, and they make pilgrimage to holy sites in western Kenya with biblical names such as Efeso (Ephesus), Kalafari (Calvary) and Sinai.

Legio Maria's members have done more than perhaps the members of any other African Christian church to insert themselves in the biblical narrative and make the story of God's intervention in history their own. In effect, they have approached the Bible as holy writ, a living and interpretive word, in much the same way early followers of Jesus used the Hebrew Bible. Simeo Ondeto did not come to do away with history, but rather to expand it so that his followers might read themselves into its annals. It is this tension that distinguishes Legio memory, worship and belief. Each time they worship, believers in the black messiah simultaneously look to the stylized picture of the crucified Christ wrought by Western Christianity, while gazing upon the familiar image of Baba Messias, emblem of their African faith.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:13, report that by the year 2000 membership among African Independent Churches had reached 126 million, nearly ten percent of the Christian population in Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Membership records have never been kept, but reports suggest that Legio's membership has grown substantially since its identification as a movement in 1963. In an interview by the author at the Legio Maria pilgrimage center of Efeso near Nzoia village, Nyanza province, Kenya, on 10 July 2005, Father Silvanus Mark Onege and Deacon John Abraham Omondi claimed that Legio Maria had well over 500,000 adherents in Kenya and another 500,000 adherents in Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan and Nigeria. To substantiate Legio's universal appeal, they told me, "even whites and Asians come to Efeso in December for our celebration." See also Audrey Wipper, "Legio Maria," photocopied manuscript, 1966, 2, Special Collections, Divinity Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, who reported that Legio Maria claimed 20,000 members within its first six months of operation, and 90,000 by the following year. Peter

J. Dirven, "A Protest and a Challenge: The Maria Legio Breakaway Church in West Kenya," *African Ecclesial Review* 12, no. 2 (1970): 127, lists the group's membership as 100,000. Nancy Schwartz, "Christianity and the Construction of Global History: The Example of Legio Maria," in *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, ed. Karla Poewe (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 135, cites a 20 September 1991 article in the Nairobi newspaper, the *Daily Nation*, placing the figure at over one million, and another 11 October 1991 article that spoke of "millions of . . . followers in East and Central Africa." Allan Anderson, "East African Churches," in *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2001), 160, offers a range in the 1990s of between 250,000 and two million.

<sup>3</sup> Dirven, "A Protest and a Challenge," 127.

<sup>4</sup> As much as members of Legio Maria may wish to remember Simeo Ondeto as sole leader and founder of their movement, historical evidence suggests otherwise. Early sources show that Aoko's career as a charismatic preacher and healer preceded Ondeto's career and eclipsed his in popularity as well. Based on Aoko's own accounts, she and Ondeto began their healing and exorcism careers independently. Aoko had the larger following at first and only agreed to associate with Ondeto after he and his mother identified themselves as the Jesus and Mary who had visited Aoko in her dream. The rejection of Aoko as a founder according to contemporary oral tellings of Legio's past, along with examples of women who functioned as Legio priests in the early days of the movement, reveals an ideological rift within the movement and the diminution of women's leadership roles since the movement's founding. The 1979 Legio Constitution barred women from functioning as "communal priests," which shows that some women were asserting their right to hold positions of authority within the church. In light of the well-documented dispute between Ondeto and Aoko over women's roles, the 1979 Constitution may also be seen as a measure to ensure Ondeto's preeminence within the movement. For a discussion of the role of women in Legio Maria, see Nancy L. Schwartz, "Selected Aspects of Legio Maria Symbolism: A Case Study from a Village Community in East Alego," Seminar Paper No. 168, Institute of African Studies (Nairobi: University of Nairobi, 1985), 29–31; and Teresia Hinga's unpublished dissertation, "Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church: A Theological Case Study of the Legio Maria Church in Kenya," University of Lancaster, 1990. Cf. Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton, "Founders and Foundresses: Revising the History of a Kenyan Independent Church," *Religion* 28 (1998): 393–404, which identifies a similar process that "defeminized" authority in the Roho or Spirit Churches in Nyanza Province.

<sup>5</sup> In a 1988 interview Gaudencia Aoko denied she was Mama Maria. In her telling of Legio's first days, she discussed meeting with Ondeto and his mother. Interestingly, even as Aoko related that Ondeto and his mother identified themselves as the African Jesus and Mary of her dream, thereby convincing her to associate with their ministry, she nevertheless spoke about them as one would any ordinary mother and son, suggesting that the relationship between Ondeto and Mama Maria was, in fact, biological and not just spiritual. Hinga, "Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church," 94.

<sup>6</sup> Also called Lake Victoria.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, "East African Churches," 161; Schwartz, "Christianity and the Construction of Global History: Legio Maria," 140.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, "East African Churches," 160. Contrary to Anderson, my field research found that celibacy is not required to serve as priest or even bishop. It is possible some do not marry after entering the priesthood, but all the Legio priests I met had wives. In fact, some had several wives. Indeed, acceptance of polygyny was one feature that drew ordinary people into Legio Maria and away from the Roman Catholic missions, which barred anyone with an "irregular marital status" from receiving the sacraments.

<sup>9</sup> See Wipper, "Legio Maria," 4; and Dirven, "A Protest and a Challenge," 132–33.

<sup>10</sup> Schwartz, "Christianity and the Construction of Global History: Legio Maria," 139. Several of Oluoch's wives, also Legios, are well-known headmistresses of selective private secondary schools run by his St. Stephen's Educational Trust. These details were confirmed by Kenyan historian Meshak Owino in a personal conversation, 29 March 2008, while attending the "War and Conflicts in Africa," conference at the University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, "East African Churches," 161.

<sup>12</sup> A wide range of birth dates have been given for Ondeto: circa 1910 according to David B. Barrett, *African Initiatives in Religion: 21 Studies from Eastern and Central Africa* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971), 31; 1916 according to Bethwell A. Ogot, *Zamani: A Survey of East African History* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974), 6; and 1926 according to an article in the *Daily Nation*, 20 September 1991. All the sources agree that Ondeto was born in Kano location.

<sup>13</sup> G. O. Owiti, "The Man They Call the Messiah," *Trust Magazine* (Nairobi, December 1979), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Hinga, "Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church," 89.

<sup>15</sup> See comments by S. Nyamira in Hinga, "Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church," 89.

<sup>16</sup> Hinga, "Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church," 92.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Christina Oguna on 16 February 1965, cited in Wipper, "Legio Maria," 11.

<sup>18</sup> See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

<sup>19</sup> Wipper, "Legio Maria," 11, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Twenty-four members of Legio were arrested for illegal assembly on 18 April 1964, including Ondeto, who was released on bail. Just eight days later, on 26 April, Ondeto and thirty-eight others were arrested for holding an illegal meeting at Nzoia village, Central Nyanza. A preliminary hearing was held on 14 May and trial proceedings began at Kisii on 25 May. Intense public discussion ensued in the media and in Parliament about the possible dangers Legio Maria might pose to society and national politics. On 30 June, Minister for Home Affairs Oginga Odinga assured Parliament that the group was not a threat. Simeo and his followers were released on 18 July 1964. Wipper, "Legio Maria," 3–4.

<sup>21</sup> I encountered this bit of Legio doctrine in my first Legio Maria church service, a Wednesday morning Mass on 29 June 2005 at Ebubaka village, Western Province, Kenya. This credo was repeated, however, in subsequent worship services and all those I interviewed affirmed their faith in the doctrine. The most likely explanation

for this doctrine, which strikes Westerners as peculiar, is that Asians, Europeans and Africans constitute the three major categories commonly used by rural Kenyans to talk about peoples of the world. In this way, Legio's doctrine of the three visitations encompasses all people within the scope of God's salvation plan.

<sup>22</sup> Got Kwer is located in Suna West location, Migori Division, Nyanza Province.

<sup>23</sup> Interview by author with Father Silvanus Mark Onege and Deacon John Abraham Omondi, priest and deacon in charge of Legio Maria pilgrimage center at Efeso in Nzoia village on 10 July 2005.

<sup>24</sup> In John 19:16–18, Jesus carries his own cross to his crucifixion. In Matthew 3:13–17, after Jesus is baptized the heavens are torn open and a voice declares, "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." In Luke 1:26–45 the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear "the Son of God" and Mary is called "blessed among women."

<sup>25</sup> Several elements from the Stations of the Cross or *Via Crucis* (one of the most popular practices of devotion for Roman Catholics) have been incorporated in the story of Ondeto's theophany on the Legio holy mountain. For instance, Jesus falls three times in the *Via Crucis* (stations 3, 7, and 9), but this is never mentioned in the Gospel accounts. Also, Jesus' meeting with his mother—the fourth Station of the Cross—does not appear in the Bible.

<sup>26</sup> Wipper, "Legio Maria," 29. The same is said of Jesus by members of his home synagogue in Matthew 13:55: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?"

<sup>27</sup> Interviews by the author with Father Silvanus Mark Onege on 10 July 2005, and Father Ephraim Wesonga Chitayi, priest in charge of Legio Maria church in Ebubaka village, on 14 July 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Wipper, "Legio Maria," 29.

<sup>29</sup> Wipper, "Legio Maria," 29.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Daniel 7:13–14; Matthew 16:27, 24:30–31; Revelation 14:14–15; Similitudes of Enoch 48; and 4 Ezra 12:31ff.

<sup>31</sup> *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 20 September 1991. In the same article, Wilson Owino Obimbo, described as "the messiah's elder brother," claimed that "Mama Margaret [Adowu] who the faithful refer to as Maria became a staunch and respected Legio Maria follower after her son had founded it. She died in 1966 and was buried at Efessos in South Ugenya, Siaya District." Despite the published testimony of Ondeto's brother, none of the Legios interviewed during my work in Kenya expressed awareness of this "earthly" version of Ondeto's genealogy, which indicates the power of oral strategies to erase the historical past as well as create it.

<sup>32</sup> The precise location is Jerusalem-Amoyo, West Kadem location, Nyatike Division, in South Nyanza District, Nyanza Province.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, "East African Churches," 161; Schwartz, "Christianity and the Construction of Global History: Legio Maria," 140–41. Whereas Anderson and others spell the name of Ondeto's successor "Ahitler," this is probably incorrect. As Schwartz points out, no such surname exists in Luo or Luhya, and is likely due to a misprint in a series of articles that ran in the *Daily Nation*. Timotheo Blasio Atila acted as the movement's leader and titular head until his death in 1998, when Pius Lawrence Jairo Chiaji was appointed pope "by the help of God through the Holy Spirit" ("Legio Maria Leader to be Buried Today," *The Nation*,

31 July 2004). The current leader of the Legio Maria Church is Pope Raphael Titus Otieno Adika (b. 1944), a retired tax man who converted from Roman Catholicism in 1971. He was appointed pope upon Chiaji's death in 2004 ("Kenyans Pay Last Respects," *East African Standard*, 9 April 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Several of these movements have been the subject of scholarly monographs. See, for example, F. B. Welbourn and B. A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home: A Study of Two Independent Churches in Western Kenya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966); Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit: History, Faith and Gender in Roho Religion in Western Kenya* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ane Marie Bak Rasmussen, *Modern African Spirituality: The Independent Holy Spirit Churches in East Africa, 1902–1976* (New York: British Academic Press, 1996); and George F. Pickens, *African Christian God-Talk: Matthew Ajuoga's Johera Narrative* (New York: University Press of America, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Galia Sabar, *Church, State and Society in Kenya: From Mediation to Opposition, 1963–1993* (London: Routledge, 2002), 52–54.

<sup>36</sup> The spread of the missions into western Kenya emanated from Kampala, an early outpost of Christian activity. The Mill Hill missionaries, a British society, arrived in Kampala in 1895 hoping to cool tensions between the English-speaking Protestant missions and French-speaking Catholic missions. Both communities had flourished, but such was their rivalry that in the early 1890s civil war broke out between them. It was tacitly agreed that the Mill Hill Fathers should concentrate on developing missions to the east of Kampala. They soon began work in Nyanza, then part of the Uganda Protectorate and remaining so until 1921, when it was transferred to the newly formed Kenya Colony. Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 560.

<sup>37</sup> Bethwell A. Ogot, "British Administration in the Central Nyanza District of Kenya, 1900–60," *Journal of African History* 4, no. 2 (1963), 249.

<sup>38</sup> Hans Burgman, *The Way the Catholic Church Started in Western Kenya* (London: Mission Book Service, 1990), 246.

<sup>39</sup> Burgman, *The Way the Catholic Church Started in Western Kenya*, 248, 250.

<sup>40</sup> Dirven, "A Protest and a Challenge," 128–29.

<sup>41</sup> Burgman, *The Way the Catholic Church Started in Western Kenya*, 247–48. Priests were horrified to hear African converts speak of "buying" or even "stealing" the sacraments. But the missions required financial support, and the Holy Eucharist was routinely withheld from those who failed to pay their annual dues. Also, a financial donation or labor could be substituted in lieu of the final period of the catechumenate, a prerequisite for admission to the sacraments.

<sup>42</sup> The Legion of Mary is an international association of Catholic laity that sees itself as doing spiritual battle with the forces of evil. Consequently, its organization is modeled on the Roman army. The *praesidium* is the smallest unit, usually consisting of from five to twenty members who meet regularly in a parish. The next level up is the *curia*, which supervises several *praesidia*.

<sup>43</sup> Hinga, "Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church," 75–83.

<sup>44</sup> Burgman, *The Way the Catholic Church Started in Western Kenya*, 287–91.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Simeo Ondeto on 28 June 1964, cited in Wipper, "Legio Maria," 1. Consequently, later researchers have noted that Legio members continue to



regard outsiders with suspicion. Marie France Perrin-Jassy, a French anthropologist commissioned by the Catholic Maryknoll Missionaries to do a study of Legio Maria and similar movements in East Africa, said that “the Legio Maria were suspicious of any recording of their names or attempts to elicit information about people for fear that the government or the missions would interfere with them.” Marie France Perrin-Jassy, *Basic Community in the African Churches*, trans. Jeanne Marie Lyons (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 1973), xiii. Similarly, when Teresia Hinga conducted research from 1984 to 1988, she noted that in her initial encounters with Legio members “they questioned me at length about the nature of my mission and who had sent me to investigate them. . . . A lot of time was spent in unelicited self-defense, as they...pointed out to me that they were law abiding citizens and . . . their followers to ‘obey the government.’” Hinga, “Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church,” 51–52.

<sup>46</sup> Wipper, “Legio Maria,” 3–4.

<sup>47</sup> Wipper, “Legio Maria,” 3.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Irimba, personal interview, Kariobangi, November 1984, cited in Hinga, “Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church,” 90–91.

<sup>49</sup> Wipper, “Legio Maria,” 3.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Tobias Ayieta in February 1965, cited in Wipper, “Legio Maria,” 7.

<sup>51</sup> Wipper, “Legio Maria,” 7.

<sup>52</sup> Schwartz, “Selected Aspects of Legio Maria Symbolism,” 8.

<sup>53</sup> A sample from my field notes includes Legio references to the following texts: Matthew 10–11, 12:27–28, 24:3, 6–7; Mark 16:14, 17–18; Luke 11:13, 17:20–26; John 1:10, 3:8–12, 7:37–39, 50, 14:16–18, 15:19–20; Acts 1:6; Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 12:1; Galatians 3:8–10; Philippians 3:17–21; Hebrews 7:11; Revelation 1–4, 6, 10:1–11, 21; Numbers 6:22–27; Proverbs 14; Song of Songs 1:6–8; Isaiah 2, 41:10–13, 60:19–20; Malachi 4.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Father Silvanus Onege and site visit to Efeso by the author on 10 July 2005. The interdict to remove one’s shoes applies to all Legio church buildings as well as the outdoor circle of grass containing the cross around which Legios gather and pray before and after church services. At Efeso shoes must be removed before entering the gate because the entire compound is considered to be a holy site.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Martin Nyambok on 6 February 1965, cited in Wipper, “Legio Maria,” 11.

<sup>56</sup> Wipper, “Legio Maria,” p. 40.

<sup>57</sup> Schwartz, “Selected Aspects of Legio Maria Symbolism,” 17.

<sup>58</sup> Wipper, “Legio Maria,” 16. Bible passages such as Matthew 4:23–25, 8:16, 28–32; Mark 5:7–8; and Acts 8:4–8 are frequently given by Legio as justifying their practices of healing and exorcism.

<sup>59</sup> During interviews with Legio church members in 2005, healing was the most commonly cited reason for joining.

<sup>60</sup> Schwartz, “Selected Aspects of Legio Maria Symbolism,” 3–4, 10–13.

<sup>61</sup> Schwartz, “Christianity and the Construction of Global History: Legio Maria,” 148–49.



<sup>62</sup> Interview by author on 14 July 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Schwartz, "Selected Aspects of Legio Maria Symbolism," 8, does note that a few locations use the alternate "I believe in the Holy Legio Maria Church."

<sup>64</sup> Ephraim Wesonga Chitayi, "Misa Miserere Ya Akutare," photocopy of handwritten document given to the author in 2005.

<sup>65</sup> These details are based on field notes and audio and visual recordings collected during visits to three Legio churches in 2005. For audio and visual materials on Legio Maria worship, see Thomas A. Kane and Bill McGowan, eds., *The Dancing Church: Video Impressions of the Church in Africa* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1991), a 58-minute documentary film on worship, dance and music-making liturgies from church groups in east, central and west Africa.

<sup>66</sup> Interview by the author on 14 July 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Wipper, "Legio Maria," 4.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Simeo Ondeto on 28 June 1964, cited in Wipper, "Legio Maria," 13.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Bishop Onyango on 23 February 1965, cited in Wipper, "Legio Maria," 13.

<sup>70</sup> Interview by author with Ephraim Chitayi on 14 July 2005. Schwartz, "Christianity and the Construction of Global History: Legio Maria," 148, tells a similar story that reflects the universalism implicit in Legio teaching. Petronalla Otambo, an old Legio woman, was determined to correct Schwartz about the name Jesus: "Jesus appeared in the world at different times, with different names. At places he's Melchizedek, Muhammad, and Buddha."

<sup>71</sup> Ondeto's supposed secrecy about being a savior functions as yet another legitimizing narrative, and it bears striking resemblance to the so-called "messianic secret" found in Mark's Gospel, in which Jesus' disciples call him the messiah after witnessing his miracles yet he forbids them from telling anyone.

<sup>72</sup> Schwartz, "Selected Aspects of Legio Maria Symbolism," 9.

<sup>73</sup> Schwartz, "Christianity and the Construction of Global History: The Example of Legio Maria," 135.

<sup>74</sup> David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>75</sup> Swiss missionary theologian Bengt Sundkler offered this cutting remark concerning the messianic churches: "It is theologically urgent to answer the question with regard to the new movements: who stands at the gates of heaven, the Jesus of scripture or some Bantu Messiah in the person of Shembe, Khambule, or Lekganyana?" Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 323.

<sup>76</sup> Interview by the author with Father Ephraim Wesonga Chitayi on 14 July 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Father Silvanus Mark Onege on 10 July 2005. In one story, the young boy Ondeto was sent out by his adopted father to look after the cattle of the homestead. While in the field, he took some soil and molded it into the form of a bull. Then he blew his breath into it, at which point the bull came to life. There were other children in the field tending their families' cattle, and when they saw what had happened, they ran home to tell their parents what the boy Ondeto had done. In another story, some of the same children asked the boy

Ondeto for food because they were hungry. He told them to close their eyes. He prayed looking toward heaven, and told them to open their eyes. When they did so, there under the tree where they were sitting was food for them to eat, as well as water for washing their hands. These stories are not unlike those about the child Jesus found in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Perhaps the most well-known tale, which also appears in the Quran (5:110), is that of Jesus making clay birds, which he then brings to life.